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ABSTRACT

The defeat of the United States in the Vietnam War affected the dearest notions held by Americans of the nature of the national existence. That defeat determined, in the words of John Hellman, "the disruption of our story, of our explanation of the past and vision of the future." This appears most poignantly, perhaps, in school history texts published after the defeat. Pre-war textbooks dispensed the indisputable truth of things. After the war, they were haunted by a sense of uncertainty. As authors tried to acknowledge the realities of a multiracial, multiethnic society, a resurgent political right reasserted the prerogatives of priviledged white males by appealing to an intransigent racism among voters. The one development of the 1980s which may have moved the nation toward conciliation rather than exacerbation of the persisting contentions of the 1960s was the dedication of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, DC. It marks the moment when the nation ceased to exempt itself from history and rejoined the human race. Studies have shown that contemporary citizens cling to individualism and immediate, private gratification heedless of--and hostile to--the lessons of history. Refusing the suddenly unbearable burden of history, the nation recedes from the politics that might recall that burden. Young U.S. citizens have shriveled conceptions of citizenship and feel no significant obligation to vote. Abandoning larger allegiances to seek individual interests, U.S. citizens depleted material resources at the expense of their children and deprived those young people of imaginative sustenance as well. A majority of U.S. youth now expect, withn their lifetime, global catastrophe in which all humankind will perish. Notes with 29 references are included. (GEA)

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THE CONTEST FOR PUBLIC CULTURE IN AMERICA SINCE THE SIXTIES

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In a democratic society, the contest of cultures is continuous. Even in the most placid times, the prevailing powers must endeavor unceasingly, if only to maintain consent and perpetuate placidity. And in America since the Sixties, there has been little placidity to perpetuate.

We have been and still are an embattled culture, or perhaps better, an embattled congeries of cultures. The way we wear our hair, the way we dress, our most trifling tastes in music, our most private preferences in intoxicants - all these and more have become ideologically charged. The way we work and play, the way we make love and marry, our most intimate conduct in bearing and raising children - all these and more have become fraught with significance for our notions of our national identity and destiny.

Hair, dress, drugs, sex, family... Any of these could serve us as touchstones of the struggles for public culture in the past quarter-century, and so could any of a dozen others as well. In a time of historical fracture and cultural fragmentation, we have experienced an unprecedented attenuation of societal consensus, an unparalleled attrition of shared meaning.

And on just that account I confess a considerable sense of arbitrariness in the focus of my comments this morning, fuzzy and wavering though even that focus will be. I could as readily focus on race, or religion, or technology, or consumerism, or the battle of the sexes, or the shifting sense of self, or even more specific subjects such as the myth of John Kennedy. As it happens, I want to focus on Vietnam and on the ways in which our defeat there affected our dearest notions of the nature of our national existence.

For that defeat determined "the disruption of our story, of our explanation of the past and vision of the future." As John Hellmann has said, it inevitably made "the larger story of America itself... the subject of intense cultural dispute."[1]

The dispute has colored thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of books and essays and arguments, and it continues to do so to this day. George Bush draws upon it when he defends Dan Quayle by thundering that, though his running mate may have dodged active military duty in southeast Asia, he "did not go to Canada, he did not burn his draft card, and he damn sure didn't burn the American flag."[2] But it appears most poignantly, perhaps, in the school history texts of the decades after our defeat.

Frances FitzGerald has documented brilliantly the degree to which those texts "no longer dare to present school children with a coherent vision of American history." Before the war, the schoolbooks were "implacable" and "seamless." They dispensed in "imperturbable, humorless" cadences the indisputable "truth of things," a truth of "bland optimism" and blind "chauvinism." After the war, the schoolbooks were haunted by a "sense of uncertainty." They depicted a society no longer homogeneous, "a patchwork" of diversities of age, class, gender, and race. They depicted a "system" no longer running "smoothly," a "rattletrap affair" beset by social problems and bereft of evident answers. They depicted a past no longer a purposeful "highway to the present," a crazyquilt "collection of issues and events that do not fit together and that lead in no single direction."[3]

But even as the school text publishers attempted to acknowledge for the first time the realities of a multiracial, multiethnic

society, a backlash against the claims of cultural pluralism began. By the end of the Seventies, a resurgent Right reasserted the prerogatives of privileged white males, discredited for a decade after the debacle in southeast Asia. In the Eighties, William Bennett, Allan Bloom, and a cadre of other conservative spokesmen demanded the reinstatement of the canonical textbook traditions of the Fifties.

Hollywood caught the conflict as surely as the publishers and politicians did. ABC offset its anti-nuclear polemic, The Day After, with its anti-Communist cartoon, Amerika. Movie studios which had not made films in thrall to the Cold War crusades since John Wayne's embarrassing epic of 1968, The Green Berets, returned to the genre in the Eighties with Rambo, Rocky IV, and such other celebrations of masculine and military authority as Top Gun and The Right Stuff; but even as they did, they went right on producing such anti-establishment smashes as Ghostbusters and E.T. and a pacifist parable which was boffo at the box office, The Karate Kid.

Washington offered as paradoxical a prospect of America as the dream factory did, and well it might have, since national politics in the Eighties became as essentially an affair of fantasies and images as the movies are. In any case, the same electorate that installed Ronald Reagan in the White House for two terms opposed almost his every policy and priority whenever the pollsters asked. The same people who acclaimed the President who pronounced the war in Vietnam a "noble cause" showed themselves decisively disinclined to support such comparable "noble causes" as an invasion of Nicaragua.

The same Congress that proffered

appropriations unstintingly to a Pentagon that remorselessly rejected the lessons of Vietnam - that insists to this day that we won the war in Vietnam - showed itself sufficiently responsive to that decisive popular disinclination to cut off military aid to the Contras.[4]

And the same conundrums that characterized the aftermath of the war characterized the fate of the cultural pluralism that came out of that unfortunate episode of white male management. It is now evident that the Republicans have reclaimed the presidency in the Eighties on the strength of a muted but unmistakable appeal to an intransigent racism among the voters; but it is no less evident that those victories were bracketed by the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976 and the campaign of Jesse Jackson in 1988, each premised on a promise of interracial amity quite inconceivable thirty years before. Moreover, these years of racist recrudescence in presidential politics were years of unparalleled advancement of blacks in every other arena of public life: in local politics, in business, and in sports and entertainment and advertising. Through the most buoyant years of Ronald Reagan's presidency, the top ratings on TV belonged to an engaging evocation of black family life, The Cosby Show. Even as the administration did its damnedest to deny blacks a place in the polity, blacks achieved as they never had before a substantial symbolic presence in the society.

Similarly, even as the Republicans extruded women from the political positions and influence they had begun to gain in the wake of the war, women continued to enter in ever greater proportions into management and the professions, continued to trust to their

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own resources in leaving their husbands and living alone at the highest rate in American history, and continued to convince their husbands to divide housework and childcare incrementally more equitably. By these measures and almost any others, the movement for women's liberation was still growing, not abating.[5]

The unruly conflicts stirred up in the cauldron of the Sixties persist to the present, despite the best efforts of the old elites to recover hegemony by a massive flaunting of money and flexing of military muscle. It turns out that the culture cannot be bought so easily and that its people are now less enamored of military ways than at any time since the dawn of systematic survey research. So far from subsiding at last, the views and values that attained a noisy dissidence in the Sixties advanced beyond deviance to dominance in the Seventies and Eighties.[6]

The one development of the Eighties which may have moved the nation toward conciliation rather than exacerbation of the persisting contentions of the Sixties was the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington. And yet, I am not so sure. Certainly the final design of the monument reflected the same struggles between resurgent Right and unrepentant Left, the super-patriot groups insisting on a realistic sculpture to supplement the abstract slabs of names which they took to be a vindication of the anti-war elements. And certainly, if the super-patriots were right, they won their battle and lost their war. They did get the realistic sculpture they demanded, but visitors to the Memorial pay far less attention to it than to the abstract aggregations of names, which prove, ironically, to be markedly more human and evocative. Yet that great gash in the

ground is equivocal. Its very abstraction refuses all reckoning with history, with the forces that shaped the actual conduct of the war. Its very evocative power seems in certain ways convenient after all for the men who would make more wars like Vietnam. It deflects thought from the state to the people. It displaces defeat with grief and particularistic politics with generic tragedy. (In that sense it is a lot like Oliver Stone's fine film, Platoon.) Yet that deflection and displacement too are equivocal. The monument may spurn the specificity of history for the timelessness of tragedy, but in so doing it admits as nothing so culturally crucial ever has that tragedy can befall America too. Even as it denies history, it marks the extraordinary moment at which, as a nation, we ceased to exempt ourselves from history, the moment at which, perhaps, we rejoined the human race.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps we cannot yet, as a people, endure deprivation of a special destiny or even the doubt we now surely suffer of our chosenness. Perhaps, as one who worked with Vietnam veterans for a decade concluded, the real source of their pain and alienation and rage was "the death of the national god." Perhaps, as Andrew Young once said, the essential failure of Jimmy Carter's presidency was his failure to answer affirmatively a traumatized people's question, "Is God still on our side?"[7]

Perhaps, if we cannot have a divinely appointed history, we will not have a history at all. I have been speaking as if the contest for public culture actually mattered, as if the lessons and judgment of history mattered, as if Americans cared about the conflicts over the presentation of the past that can be discerned in their schools

and movies and national ceremonies. It is time to confess that some of the most striking soundings of contemporary American culture call into question whether we still share any consequential public culture at all, and whether, even if we do, history is any longer the sphere of its discovery, discussion, or specification.

In Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah and his associates found the Americans they interviewed overweeningly attached to ideals of expressive individualism heedless of - and hostile to - history. In New Rules, Daniel Yankelovich saw the Americans he surveyed casting off the constraints of the past in a self-absorbed search for personal fulfillment in the present. And in a number of other important studies of American society in our time, a number of other historians and social scientists have observed a similar unconcern for the salience of the past and the future and a similar insistence on immediate gratification in a narcissistic culture of consumerism which subordinates all social responsibility to the entitlements of the self.[8]

Assertion of the prerogatives of the present was, of course, an essential element of the countercultural project of the Sixties. The prevalence of that assertion, since the Sixties, as a norm of national life is another measure of the consummation of that countercultural project in the Seventies and Eighties. As the hippies and their gurus hoped, America has become "a land without memory."[9]

Even when Frances FitzGerald found fragmentation and an abandonment of coherent national narrative in the school texts, she still found the school texts themselves a matter of major importance

to publishers and school boards alike. But that was a decade ago. Today the decay of historical consciousness has proceeded much further. As Henry Giroux has argued, the school texts of the Eighties show an attenuation of public focus and almost an incapacity to conceive sustained collective endeavor; the philosophy promoted in the schools now is one which, on his account, depends upon a willful "historical amnesia" and a deliberate definition of citizenship in a political vacuum. The study of history is, in Diane Ravitch's words, "struggling for survival" in the schools, its accustomed place in the curriculum increasingly preempted by the "vague and amorphous" - but unfailingly a-historical - field of the social studies.[10]

It is difficult to escape the suspicion that the suspension of engagement with the past and the disconnection from all considerations of common enterprise are late-blooming flowers of the erosion of the American myth in the jungles of southeast Asia. A legion of scholars and commentators in the Eighties have lamented "that Americans were moving incoherently into the future from a past they no longer found intelligible," and more than a few of them have explicitly attributed it to the "millennial chill" that seized the American psyche after Vietnam. As C. Vann Woodward said, our prostration "took hold" when we were "caught short...at the climax of our own mythic national pretensions" and exposed in Indochina "in deeds and failures that mocked all the old myths."[11]

It is also difficult to shake the sense that the obsession with self-fulfillment in the immediacy of the moment is also a fruit of the collapse of confidence in the collective fate. As William

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McNeill noted, "public action becomes very difficult to improvise or sustain" in the absence of a widely accepted "public myth."[12]

Over the years of our embarrassed retreat to the pursuit of private gratifications, we have found ourselves unable to embody any enduring idea of a public interest. We have been keen to get government off our backs, but we have not managed to mount any convincing conception of a shared endeavor or any compelling story of who we are and what we are about. We have had tentative recourse to the new norm of cultural pluralism, admitting to the American saga a multitude of Americans our predecessors excluded without compunction; but we have at the same time lost all purchase upon the saga to which we are admitting them. Privatism is our passion in the post-war world as it never was in the Sixties or even in the Fifties, when we still trusted in our world mission. We proliferate self-expressive stories, but we have given up our story together. We fortify ourselves in our separate havens from the heartless world, and we imagine even those havens in ways which preclude communion. As one of Bellah's informants put it, our dearest dream is a home with twenty acres and "a moat around it with alligators."[13]

Refusing the suddenly unbearable burden of history, we recede from the politics that might recall that burden. At the climax of the campaign for the presidency in 1988, three whales trapped in Arctic ice get more attention than the candidates themselves. The president, pronounced the Great Communicator by the pundits, takes to the airwaves and Americans turn off their television sets by the millions. We prefer a human-interest adventure to the contest for the highest office in the land. We prefer sitcoms and soap operas

to our president even when we rather like our president.[14]

In 1985, Bellah and his colleagues confessed their chagrin at the attrition of an older American attachment to a more expansive ideal of political life. Almost to a man and woman, the people they interviewed testified to the priority of individual ends to common purposes and possibilities. Americans were good citizens, in those interviews of the early Eighties, if they merely managed to vote more often than not.[15]

Now, in 1988, even that shrunken standard of citizenship seems excessive to many. Pollster Peter Hart conducts focused interviews with young Americans and finds that their notion of citizenship does not even demand a few minutes in a voting booth every other year. Their idea of civic obligation is so shriveled that they call themselves good citizens if they merely do not break the law.[16]

This flight from politics and alienation from all serious collective engagement shows itself less strikingly but more manifestly in the relentless decline of participation in electoral politics. Voter turnout in the presidential elections of 1980 and 1984 was, despite the putative popularity of Ronald Reagan, the lowest since the Second World War; and turnout in 1988 was lower still.

Young adults are disproportionately the dropouts. Only forty percent of them voted in 1984, and less than a quarter of them in 1986. As they unabashedly tell the survey researchers who trouble to ask, they simply do not feel any significant sense of civic implication or obligation. They acknowledge only the most meager connectedness to any public enterprise.[17]

When Hart asked one group of a dozen 18-24-year-olds who among

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them would enlist if the Sviet Union invaded Europe and the president called for volunteers, not a single one of them offered himself. When Hart asked another such group what aspects of American life made the country special, not a one of them could think at first of anything at all. Finally, after prolonged silence, one of them ventured "Cable TV," and the others all nodded in relieved agreement.[18]

Beyond the appeals to impulse of consumerism and the fast-flash fantasies of the commercials which stimulate it, Americans no longer share with one another stories which impart social significance to their lives or lend special meaning to their mutual existence.[19] In the 1980s, for the first time since systematic opinion polling began half a century ago, a majority of Americans do not expect the future to be better than the present and do not deem their children's prospect brighter than their own.[20] The invincible optimism so long a constituent element of the national character seems all at once to have ebbed. The rhetoric of the Reagan White House may trumpet the country's recovery from its malaise and retrieval of its accustomed self-esteem, but the evidence of the polls pipes an unprecedented decay of faith in the future. And since our sense of history always hinged on our heady assurance of bigger and better things to come, we now find ourselves adrift on uncertain seas, doubting divine direction of our mysterious voyage.

Amid such perplexities, Americans began in the Seventies to give up all larger allegiances and seek unconflictedly their own individual interests. Dreading the withdrawal of God's grace from the land - and following the desperate logic of that dread - they

grabbed mindlessly for all they could get, indifferent not only to the needs of their neighbors but also to those of their own offspring and of the generations to come. Their brutish gluttony depleted the material resources at the disposal of their children and deprived those young people of imaginative sustenance as well.

As sordid and soulless as this story which the yuppies tell of America may be, it is nonetheless not nearly as appalling as another story which their children credit. For their children believe in the extinction of all story and the obliteration of all the stuff of story. A majority of American youth now expect, in their own lifetime, a global catastrophe in which they and all humankind will perish.[21]

NOTES

[1] John Hellmann, American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986), p. x.

[2] Philadelphia Inquirer, August 23, 1988, pp. 1-A, 4-A.

[3] Hellmann, American Myth, p. 207; Frances FitzGerald, America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century (Boston, Atlantic - Little, Brown, 1979), pp. 10, 7, 9, 73, 10-1.

[4] Garry Wills, Reagan's America (New York, Doubleday, 1987); Michael Rogin, "Ronald Reagan," the Movie: and Other Episodes in Political Demonology (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987); Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics (New York, Hill and Wang, 1986). On the insistence of the defense establishment that American armed forces won the war in Vietnam, see James Gibson, The Perfect War: The War We Couldn't Lose and How We Did (Boston, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986) and, more directly but less accessibly, Russell Weigley, personal communication.

[5] On the rising divorce rate, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970 (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1975), pp. 49, 64; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1985 (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1984), pp. 57, 81-2. On the division of housework, see Philadelphia Inquirer.

[6] See, e.g., Louis Harris, Inside America (New York, Vintage, 1987), pp. 342-8; Mark Niedergang, "Common Sense," Nuclear Times 7, no. 3 (January/February, 1989), pp. 21-2.

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[7] Hellmann, American Myth, pp. 135-6.

[8] Robert Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985); Daniel Yankelovich, New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down (New York, Random House, 1981). See also, e.g., Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations (New York, Norton, 1978); Richard Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980 (New York, Pantheon, 1983).

[9] Quoted in Henry Giroux, Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life: Critical Pedagogy in the Modern Age (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 3.

[10] Giroux, Schooling, p. 4; Diane Ravitch, The Schools We Deserve (New York, Basic Books, 1985), p. 116.

[11] Hellmann, American Myth, p. 205; Lance Morrow, "Rediscovering America," Time (July 7, 1980), p. 29; C. Vann Woodward, "The Fall of the American Adam," New Republic 185 (December 2, 1981), p. 15.

[12] William McNeill, "The Care and Repair of Public Myth," Foreign Affairs 61 (1981), p. 1.

[13] Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart, p. 181.

[14] Alexander Cockburn, "Beat the Devil," The Nation 247 (August 27/ September 3, 1988), p. 155.

[15] Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart, p , though see p. 181.

[16] People for the American Way Forum (Fall, 1988), p. 8.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

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[19] John Staudenmaier, "Restoring the Lost Art: Storytelling, Electronic Media, and Fragmented Public Discourse," The Way (London) 28 (1988), 313-22.

[20] Yankelovich, New Rules, p. 181; see also, e.g., Philadelphia Inquirer, December 21, 1984, p. 4-C; Philadelphia Inquirer, July 15, 1987, p. 13-A.

[21] Nuclear Times 6 (March/April, 1988), p. 8; see also, e.g., Philadelphia Inquirer, August 19, 1988, p. 2-A.